

Touching Lives Through the California 5 a Day— for Better Health! Campaign:

A Story of Personal Empowerment and Community Change

Aleta is a bright, energetic African American single mother living in Oakland, California. She works hard to make ends meet and strives to provide the best for her two children. Aleta's strong features match her even stronger will, and her smile silently conveys her hope that the community she calls home will be a much healthier place to live in for years to come.

Aleta has many friends in her community, including Lupe, a cheerful Latina who lives a few doors away in her apartment complex. Aleta and Lupe visit often, exchanging stories, talking about ways to improve their community, and sharing the challenges of raising their children alone in an often times unpredictable neighborhood. They look forward to their weekends together going to the park and cooking a healthy Sunday supper for their kids and extended family.

On Monday morning, Aleta wakes before dawn to get ready for work in the garment manufacturing facility

across town. Her children rise with her and bustle around the apartment readying themselves for school. Ashley, age 9, and Jacob, age 11, take the bus to the elementary school across town. Their school has been involved with the *California Nutrition Network for Healthy, Active Families* and the *California Children's 5 a Day—Power Play! Campaign* for three years, helping to create a positive environment that encourages fruit and vegetable consumption and physical activity. On the way to their classrooms, they pass the new school garden that is bright and colorful this time of year with peppers, tomatoes, berries, green beans, and more. Ashley and Jacob have a healthy school breakfast to start their day. During class, Ashley taste tests a variety of fruits and vegetables from the garden. Jacob's class talks about the benefits of eating *5 a Day* and works in small groups to design cool, kid-friendly advertisements that



promote fruits and vegetables. At lunch, Ashley and Jacob make their way to the school cafeteria, which is adorned with posters of taste-tempting produce and fun physical activity moves. Today they choose to eat from a salad bar that is filled with fresh, ripe fruits and vegetables that the school purchased from local farmers. After school, Ashley and Jacob head to the local Boys and Girls Club where they refuel with a healthy snack and enjoy fun physical activity. Ever since the club became involved with the *Children's 5 a Day—Power Play! Campaign* and passed its healthy snack policy, there have been plenty of fruits and vegetables every afternoon.

Making her way through the garment manufacturing facility in the early morning, Aleta stops briefly at the cafeteria to pick up breakfast. She notices the refrigerated vending machines now carry a selection of 100 percent fruit juices and fresh salads, among other healthy options. She selects a low-fat yogurt and an apple and clocks in. While on her way to her sewing station, she sees a flier announcing a lunchtime social event. The company-sponsored event is a brief walking

exercise around the complex.

Aleta notes this for her lunch hour, as it would be a nice break from the long hours she spends sewing t-shirts. As the clock strikes noon, Aleta grabs a salad with low-fat dressing and a cup of sliced fruit from the employer subsidized foodservice program. After her meal, Aleta walks over to the crowd gathering for the lunchtime event. Energized from her walk, she returns to work and completes the remainder of her shift. Aleta is committed to the company she works for because her employer, who partners with the *5 a Day—Be Active! Worksite Program*, knows first hand that offering healthy foods and physical activity opportunities improves productivity, reduces illness-related absenteeism, and improves morale.

Before Aleta heads home to meet her children, she stops at the corner grocery store to pick up ingredients for tonight's dinner. Upon entering the store, she is greeted by a wide selection of quality fruits and vegetables. She smiles at the results of her hard work. For years, Aleta and her community have been working with city officials, state policymakers, nutrition advocates, and business leaders to improve access to quality fruits and



vegetables in her neighborhood. This store recently expanded its produce selection as a result of those efforts, and she is happy to see it finally come full circle. The store is also partnering with the *5 a Day Retail Program* to offer delicious fruit and vegetable samples, free recipe books, and colorful signs that entice shoppers to choose produce over their unhealthy, high-fat competitors. As she makes her way through the produce department, Aleta reaches for an assortment of vegetables and notices bright red strawberries on sale. Thinking of her children, she grabs a basket for dessert and heads to the checkout line.

On Friday, Lupe tells Aleta about a community event she'll be participating in over the weekend. The local community events are often filled with vendors tempting the attendees with unhealthy foods. As a community health leader for the *Latino 5 a Day Campaign*, Lupe is proud of the colorful, appealing *5 a Day* booth where she and her team will offer healthy food demonstrations and taste testings and share what they have learned about healthy eating and physical activity. The booth often attracts the attention of the media, and Lupe and her team are ready to share the benefits of healthy living with reporters. As Aleta and Lupe talk, their children are playing a game and listening to the radio when they hear an advertisement promoting the *5 a Day* and physical activity

messages. The children tell their mothers that they have seen these messages a lot lately – at their school, the Boys and Girls Club, and even on television.

On Sunday morning, Aleta and her children walk to the community church a few blocks from their apartment.

The church is like no other in the community; not only does it have a well-established *African American 5 a Day* health ministry, but it proudly hosts the only farmers' market in town. While it may seem like a simple task to have a farmers' market in the middle of the biggest agricultural state in the country,

Aleta and other parishioners, church leaders, health advocates, and state and local policymakers worked tirelessly for nearly 2 years to have a place where community members have ready access to fresh, affordable fruits and vegetables and where WIC vouchers are proudly accepted. As Aleta and her children make their way into the church, they see the farmers unloading their pick-up trucks that are full of tasty fruits and vegetables they harvested yesterday.

Aleta and her children settle into the red velvet-covered church pew to hear the sermon. The pastor reads passionately



from the scripture and communicates the importance of maintaining a healthy body and soul. He emphasizes that heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and obesity can be reduced by eating healthy foods and doing regular physical activity. He then brings the congregation to their feet to sing a hymn and sway to the spirited organ music. When the music stops, Aleta smiles at her children, knowing that she is doing what she can to follow the pastor's word.

After the service, Aleta, Ashley, Jacob, and the rest of the congregation gather in the foyer for a snack. The pastor recently established a new food policy in the church to encourage the parishioners to eat healthier. Aleta reaches for fresh fruit, a bagel, and orange juice, which is a nice change from the coffee and doughnuts of prior church gatherings. Ashley and Jacob enjoy a quick bite to eat, and then hurry to play kick ball with the other children in the back of the church lot. Meanwhile, Aleta makes her way to the church farmers' market. She tastes a slice of a juicy, sweet nectarine, which was offered by one of the farmers, and decides to buy a few. She also selects vegetables for tonight's dinner, and then makes her way home with her children. Before Aleta retires for the evening,

she reflects on the progress that has been made over the past several years in building a healthier community. She knows that more progress is needed and vows to continue to have a strong voice in making positive changes.

Access and the power to readily choose a healthy lifestyle are just two of the many important principles that the *California 5 a Day Campaign*, *California Nutrition Network for Healthy, Active Families*, and their partners strive to maintain every day. Although we are proud to say that the events captured in Aleta's life are based on true stories, our work is far from done. There are still too many low-income communities throughout California that do not have access to fresh, affordable, healthy foods and safe physical activity opportunities. We will not stop until Aleta and others like her have an environment where eating 5 to 9 servings of fruits and vegetables and enjoying physical activity every day are both easy to do and socially supported.

